Ahead of the curve

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A GUIDE outlining the procedures for research, which Malay literature specialist Dr Amin Sweeney wrote some 40 years ago, still stands as a basic reading text in any methodology seminar today.

"Sweeney wrote it in 1972 and it became the basis for all his subsequent researches. It remains useful today as it rests on a strong grasp of the realities of working in the field," says James T Collins, a historical linguist at the Northern Illinois University, America.

Collins said this during his presentation on Sweeney's contributions to the study of Malay culture and tradition at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) recently.

Organised by UKM's Institute of Ethnic Studies, the memorial lecture paid tribute to Sweeney's more than 50 years contribution to Malay studies before his death in 2010.

In the article Some Suggestions On The Collecting Of Oral Literature, with special reference to West Malaysia, published in the Federation Museums Journal (17th edition), Sweeney mentioned conducting a preliminary study to determine "basic local practices and perceptions" as his first step in research.

He believed that in all empirical projects, the researcher must test his hypotheses again and again, and find new materials to verify or disprove initial conclusions.

Sweeney also listed five components of the collection process — finding informants, dealing with informants, recording, interviewing and transcribing.

His method was ahead of the curve when compared to anthropologists of his era.

Linguists of the 1950s and 1960s had "purposely sought out the oldest members of a community to serve as informants in English dialect surveys".

Sweeney, on the other hand, recorded the best and the worst performers of oral tradition, regardless of age and experience, as he believed this was the "only way we can discover the criteria which are used to distinguish good from bad".

In keeping with this method, Sweeney spent 10 years revisiting, rethinking and reactivating his projects.

For example, Sweeney diligently recorded the performance of Raja Budak presented by Tuk Selampit Mat Nor five times between 1968 and 1978.

Besides taping Mat Nor, Sweeney also recorded his teacher Setapa telling the same tale.

"When he invited Mat Nor to perform it one more time in 1991, (the storyteller) had forgotten the story," says Collins.

Sweeney also urged researchers to interview informants in their element.

As Sweeney puts it: "The onus is on the (researcher) to create the necessary atmosphere by ensuring that an audience is present" as the wrong setting can yield skewed results.

He shared many more tips on topics ranging from interviewing and transcribing in his article, which Collins recommends to all researchers.

"Sweeney's overall methodology — available in journals and books in libraries and online stores — is worth exploring in great detail," he adds.